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ANGINHO

During our years in Brazil, my wife and I maintained a constant rivalry in our knowledge of the Portuguese language; and as our spheres of action were different, there was considerable difference in our vocabulary. Either one, finding that a word long familiar to him was new to the other, would always say, "Oh, don't you know that? I've known it ever since -- such and such a time." I had been in Brazil a good many years when a child came to the door one day, asking for some flowers for an anginho. I knew the word, of course -- it means a little angel. But one does not expect to have dealings with angels, big or little, in this life, and in my obtuseness of the moment I failed to see the implication of it, and had to ask my wife, which gave her a chance to score off me again.

An anginho is a dead baby, prepared for burial. In that land, where the birth rate is high, and the infant mortality rate is also high, (although, considering the living conditions of a great part of the people, one is astounded that it is not higher) the spectacle of a baby's funeral is a very common one. The people call it an anginho; and they say that a man will be happy if he has a whole chorus of little angels to sing to him in heaven.

Even with all our modern ways of dressing it up, a funeral is a gloomy affair. In the cities and larger towns of North Brazil there are now undertaking establishments capable of conducting a funeral more or less in accord with our modern standards of propriety, though even in Recife up to 1949 I did not know of any place where embalming was done. But in the interior, in the small towns or in the open country, there is little to disguise the stark reality of death. Many of the people have only a very tenuous, if any, connection with any church; and in many cases there is no priest or minister present, no prayer offered, no eulogy to the departed; at the hour appointed friends take up the coffin and bear it to the cemetery, and it is laid in the grave.

At the funeral of an adult, there are usually a good many friends and neighbors at the house, and the body is laid out in the coffin in the sala. Burial must be as

soon as possible after death, for in that tropical climate decay sets in quickly, and the odor soon becomes oppressive. Usually, on entering the sala, one sees under the coffin a pan of burning charcoal, on which incense, or some aromatic herb, is sprinkled occasionally. There are usually some flowers, home grown, of course, in evidence, but only white or very pale ones; any red especially is considered unbecoming. When the moment comes, and the movement begins to take out the body, there arises a great wailing and crying among the women. This is the final leave-taking for them, as women and girls do not accompany the body to the cemetery.

The cemetery may be far away, but in all except very modern funerals the body is borne by hand. There is generally no lack of pall bearers, and new recruits are constantly coming up to take the place of men grown weary with the load, without breaking the march. The cemetery is surrounded with a high wall of brick and stucco, often with broken glass on the top, and with a securely locked gate, because vandalism is very prevalent, especially among boys. Inside one finds substantial vaults, with stately monuments, for the well to do; but in the part where the poor are buried there are only rude wooden crosses to mark the graves, and these fall down in a few years, so that the place is forgotten. Since the cemetery must be walled, the space is necessarily limited; and among the graves of the poor the same ground is dug over repeatedly, so that it is not at all uncommon to dig up bones in digging a grave. I remember a funeral that I attended where there were a skull and several other bones among the piles of dirt for filling the grave. On that occasion it was raining, too, and I have seldom witnessed a spectacle so depressing. The cemetery scene in Hamlet takes on new meaning after such a sight.

In Brazil, cemeteries are public institutions, and are open to people of any faith or of none. It is necessary, however, to get a permit, and go through a good bit of red tape, and pay some fees. To get the permit it is necessary to have a death certificate, signed by a physician. It may well be that no doctor has seen the patient; but Brazilian doctors are usually very accommodating, and one can always find a doctor ready to sign the certificate. Since it is a mere formality anyway, the doctor sees no use in raising up conscientious scruples about it.

Along the roads in the interior one often sees little wooden crosses set up by graves made at an intersection of roads. I had long supposed that these were graves of victims of automobile accidents, but was informed that they are graves of unbaptized children. This is due partly to superstition on the part of ignorant country people, and partly, I believe, to a desire to avoid the moderate fees charged for interment in the cemetery. Certainly there is no law forbidding burial in the cemetery of unbaptized children, and I am sure that of the great numbers of babies buried in the cemeteries, many must be unbaptized. I was never able to learn exactly for what reason a road intersection is chosen as a place of burial.

Among the very poor it is not uncommon to borrow, rather than buy, a coffin. Coffins are much less elaborate affairs in the Brazilian interior than in the United States, and consequently less expensive; but for a man possessing nothing at all, even a small expense may be too heavy. The borrowed coffin is used to carry the body decently to the cemetery, where it is removed from the coffin and buried, the coffin then being returned to its owner, as good as ever, or nearly so. I have heard of churches that kept a coffin for use among the poor of ^{their} members -- large enough, I suppose, to accommodate any member who might need to use it.

A baby's funeral is a very common sight, passing through the streets on the way to the cemetery. The little coffin is borne by a group of children, anywhere from six to twelve years of age, usually not a single grown person accompanying them. It seems a festive occasion to the children. They walk along with their little burden, laughing and chattering, apparently having the time of their lives, and so far as one can judge, feeling nothing of sadness or affliction. Not a care appears to disturb the perfect happiness of the occasion.

A Scotch friend of mine, engaged in mining operations far back in the interior, was seated one day with a local acquaintance, taking mid morning coffee at the little café, which as usual was open to the sidewalk all across the front. As they sat conversing over their coffee, they spied a funeral procession of a baby, approaching along the street. "Vamos ver o anjinho passar?" (Shall we watch the funeral pass?)

suggested the local acquaintance. My friend agreed, and they rose from their table and walked to the entrance, to see the little group go laughing by. Willing to make conversation, my friend asked, "Do you know whose child it is?"

Perfectly casual, the other replied, "E meu." (It's mine.)